

## Parapsychology and Women's Emancipation: A Historical Cliché?

RENAUD EVRARD<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract** – Becoming mediums or psychics is framed as an opportunity for feminist commitment. Through the paranormal, the classical view of domesticized and dominated women was challenged by new cultural norms pertaining to gender and corporeality. But is this claim reliable, or is this a historical reconstruction in order to culturalize a scientific controversy, which sidesteps examination of experimental evidence? No empirical studies support this claim. The culturalist interpretation that spiritualist mediumship was above all a privileged mode of expression for oppressed women should therefore be put into perspective.

*Keywords:* feminism – history – mediumship – spiritualism

### Parapsychologie und Frauenemanzipation: ein historisches Klischee?

**Erweiterte Zusammenfassung** – Medium oder Hellseherin zu werden, wird als Chance für feministisches Engagement angesehen. Durch das Paranormale wurde die klassische Sichtweise von häuslichen und dominierten Frauen durch neue kulturelle Normen in Bezug auf Geschlecht und Körperlichkeit in Frage gestellt. Die meisten Medien, Hellseher und Heiler seien Frauen gewesen. Aber ist diese Behauptung, die von mehreren Historikern aufgestellt wurde, glaubwürdig, oder handelt es sich um eine historische Rekonstruktion, um eine wissenschaftliche Kontroverse zu kulturalisieren, die einer Prüfung experimenteller Evidenz ausweicht? In der Tat gibt es keine empirischen Studien, die diese Behauptung stützen. Die wenigen Daten, die wir finden konnten, zeigten kein solches Missverhältnis zwischen Frauen und Männern. Parapsychologische Studien über geschlechtsspezifische Unterschiede in der Psi-Leistung waren ebenso selten und nicht schlüssig. Wir plädieren daher für eine vollständig symmetrische Betrachtung der Geschichte der psychischen Forschung und des Spiritismus und prüfen, ob dieser Emanzipationskatalysator nicht ein gemeinsames Merkmal aller in diesen Bereichen tätigen Männer und Frauen ist. Einigen Autoren zufolge handelte es sich eher um die gesellschaftliche Rezeption des Spiritualismus, die einen Diskurs der pejorativen Feminisierung hervorbrachte. In dieser Sichtweise wird eine Gleichsetzung von Paranormalität, Weiblichkeit

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1 **Renaud Evrard** is a clinical psychologist, associate professor of psychology at the University of Lorraine (Nancy, France), and co-founder of the Center for information, research, and counseling on exceptional experiences. He has been the president of the Parapsychological Association from 2019 to 2021.

und Marginalität aufrechterhalten. Die kulturalistische Deutung, spiritistische Medialität sei vor allem eine privilegierte Ausdrucksweise unterdrückter Frauen, sollte daher relativiert werden. Durch das Ableiten in einen scheinbar feministischen Diskurs, der das Paranormale als einen Ausweg für vom Patriarchat unterdrückte Frauen sieht, könnten einige Historiker die stigmatisierenden Kategorien reproduzieren, die sie eigentlich zu beschreiben und zu analysieren versuchen sollten. Dies unterstreicht die Notwendigkeit einer geschlechtergerechten soziokulturellen Darstellung, die auch die männliche Medialität und die Vielfalt der Art und Weise, wie Männer die Medialität als Beruf und Identität in ihren historischen Kontexten aufrechterhalten haben, einschließt.

*Schlüsselbegriffe:* Feminismus – Geschichte – Mediumismus – Spiritualismus

### ***A Common Unsupported Claim Introduction***

It's a common claim by historians of spiritualism and psychical research that women found a voice and emancipated themselves through their new roles as mediums or psychics. But we should encourage a fully symmetrical approach to the history of psychical research and spiritualism, and look, for instance, if this catalyst of emancipation – if it existed – is not a common characteristic for all the men and women involved in these fields.

Very recently, the philosopher Philippe Baudouin devoted an illustrated book to women with paranormal “gifts.” In a sentence of her preface, the historian Nicole Edelman affirms that most sleepwalkers, seers, visionaries, mediums, healers etc. “are women” (Edelman, in Baudouin, 2021: 13). This statement, however, is not examined in the rest of the book.

This is not the first time the historian has made this estimate. She is presented in Baudouin's book as “the first in France to take up the question of spiritualism as a historian, studying the role and the path of women within this movement.” In her work (Edelman, 1995), in which she focused on seers, healers and visionaries in France from 1875 to 1914, she estimated that 80% of mediums were women. Spiritualism is presented as an opportunity: “To become a medium,” remarks Nicole Edelman, “is to change one's state, to make possible the transgression of the social norms established by a century so hard on women” (Edelman, as cited in Baudouin, 2021: 19).

In a similar vein, Giulia Katherine Hoffmann begins her dissertation on “female mediumship in Britain and America in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” by casually stating: “That most of them were women signals how Spiritualist mediumship offered the potential for mediums to challenge nineteenth-century gender norms” (Hoffmann, 2014: 4).

There is an abundant cultural history literature that looks at Victorian era (or Third Republic in France) psychic research and spiritualism through the lens of the feminine, with a similar axiom of a greater propensity of women than men involved in the field (Braude,

2001; Galvan, 2010; Lehman, 2009; Lowry, 2013; Oppenheim, 1985; Owen, 1990). Are we so certain of this?

We have not been able to trace the origin of this hypothesis, but we see it promoted from all sides within the framework of a feminist reading of the history of science from the 1970s. Statements regarding the predominance of female in this area can even be traced back to Mesmerism and Hypnotism currents (Schüttpezl & Voss, 2020). Even if this social-cultural feminist approaches of how mediumship as a profession worked for some women, we should expect an equally nuanced investigation into how mediumship as a profession worked for men.

### ***Where is the data?***

The historian R. Laurence Moore (1975) also devoted a study to spiritualist mediumship in Victorian America, though he does not make the mistake of confusing historical data with social discourse. He shows that mediumship has, progressively and by certain actors, been associated with stereotypical notions of femininity: Mediums were assumed to be “passive,” “impressionable,” and “extremely sensitive.” These very traits had long been used to justify excluding women from participating meaningfully in public life. According to Moore (1975: 201–202), “Mediumship became a professional role identified primarily with women, even though many of the practitioners of the mediums’ art were men.” He quoted a census of spirit mediums which was conducted in 1859 and showed a fairly even balance between the sexes (121 women as against 110 men; Clark, 1859). He selected some cases as per D.D. Home (Lamont, 2005) to claim that “some of the most famous of the nineteenth-century spirit communicators” (Moore, 1975: 202) were men.

Rather than expressing selective opinions, historian Lynn L. Sharp (2006: 120–121, note 92) has attempted to use an empirical method. She estimates, from the French *Revue Spirite* for the years 1869–1879, that two thirds of mediums were male, and suggests the same amount in the private groups she documented. This is a fragmented figure which illustrates the imprecision of the data.

The researcher Michel Granger (2020) has devoted an exhaustive and masterly study to ectoplasmic mediums. Of 350 documented cases of ectoplasmy, 182 mediums are men and 168 are women. Furthermore, a quarter of women operate in pairs with their husbands.

Almost all previous historical narratives rely on the assumption that most mediums are women, but evidence is still lacking. It would be necessary to draw on such systematic studies, for example, by examining the gender of the subjects studied by the researchers, in a given research group, to be differentiated from the testimonies received and the press reports. A study by women researchers is also worthwhile.

### *Is Such a Claim Really Feminist?*

The historical literature abounds of evidence for the feminist liberation theme. In this genre of cultural history literature, the predominance of women is interpreted as a sign of their emancipation. Alexandra Owen (1990) has shown how female mediums and even psychic healers challenged Victorian gender norms. She argued that women achieved this position of authority within the movement because of the Spiritualists' belief that they possessed the traits of sensitivity and passivity necessary for mediumship. In a similar vein, Ann Braude (2001) argued that mediums achieved leadership positions in spiritualism and the women's rights movement through their mediumistic skills, but by embodying idealized feminine attributes. Jill Galvan (2010) and Giulia Katherine Hoffmann (2014) have developed a more complex view, where female mediums applied both idealization and disruption of gender norms.

In no case these historians discuss works showing possible gender differences in parapsychological performance. As a matter of fact, these works are so rare (Bierman & Scholte, 2002; Dunne, 1998; McCraty, Atkinson, & Bradley, 2004; Watt, Fraser, & Hopkinson, 2006), that it is still not possible to conclude that such gender differences exist in this field (Hinman, 2017).

Moore (1975) argued it was more a case of the social reception of spiritualism, which produced a discourse of pejorative feminization:

Despite Home, however, and despite other men allegedly adept at invoking spirits, the popular impression persisted that mediumship was female. Newspapers hostile to the vogue of spiritualism, and there were many of them, characterized male mediums as 'addle-headed feminine men.' (Thomson, 1855) For, according to unfriendly accounts, mediumship represented above all else the corruption of femininity. (Moore, 1975: 202)

This quote shows how essential it is to look at the social context of men and women as mediums, whether their experiences were idealizing or disrupting the understanding of masculinity and femininity. Moore provides an analysis of this process by focusing on the literature on female mediums, while emphasizing that he is dealing with only a sample of the available material, since there is just as much material available on male mediums that he did not consider in his work (Moore, 1975: 206). And yet, there are relatively few studies that seek to overcome this gender bias.

The cultural interpretation that spiritualist mediumship was above all a privileged mode of expression for oppressed women should be put into perspective. At the expense of historical data, this retrospective vision maintains an assimilation between paranormal, femininity and marginality. This is a characteristic of the Trickster archetype identified by Hansen (2001), which is also connected with deception, cheating, and untrustworthiness. Why should it neces-

sarily be a women's issue? This gender bias supposedly embracing the feminist cause can even turn into a caricature. For instance, Baudouin (2021) equates the strict experimental controls exercised on subjects with abuse of a masculine dominant position, forgetting that the same operations were applied to male subjects for contextual epistemological reasons.

With regard to parapsychologists, this gender bias was less obvious. For instance, in the first volume of the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, Julian Ochorowicz (1884: 278) argues that “women are no-more susceptible than man” to hypnosis and the mystic influence of magnetizers, despite the ideas of that time regarding hysterical women. However, other researchers, notably Frank Podmore (1896), spread a gendered and pejorative theory towards young girls who would be responsible for poltergeist cases, by means of frauds. This “naughty little girl theory” (Evrard, 2020; Podmore, 1898–1899) was based on a ridiculously small sample of 11 cases, 8 of which involved young girls. Another specialist of poltergeists, William G. Roll (1977: 386), stated that “apparently sex was generally not important in determining agency.” On the basis of a collection of 54 cases investigated by the IGPP, Huesmann and Schriever (2022) found 56% male and 44% female focus persons among a total of 52 focus persons. A female trend is far from obvious. This reinforces the need for a gender balance sociocultural narrative that includes male mediumship and the variety of how men sustained mediumship as a profession and an identity in their historical contexts.

The issue of paranormal performances should not be confused with those of paranormal beliefs or experiences. Gender differences may appear in the reporting of such beliefs and experiences (Sagher, Butzer & Wahbeh, 2019), but this may be explained by various factors which are still not clear (Wish, 2014).

### ***Conclusion***

There is the marked absence of facts supported by verifiable evidence, meaning that the feminization of Victorian spiritualism implicitly operates as a prejudice, relaying stereotypes that serve neither history as a discipline nor feminist epistemology. This essay consists mainly of one point of critique against a feminist hypothesis which should lead to a more thorough research that we are not providing here.

Though there are indeed engaging and pertinent female trajectories in the history of spiritualism and psychical research, the generalization of certain so-called feminist interpretations is more than a historical cliché. By slipping into a seemingly feminist discourse that sees the paranormal as a way out for women oppressed by the patriarchy, some historians may reproduce the stigmatizing categories they should arguably be seeking to describe and analyze, according to Moore (1975).

We can understand that the scientific evidence of psychical research and spiritualism belongs to an entirely different discipline, outside most historians' agenda. But this lack of interdisciplinarity can have important consequences. Some historians have found in this cultural perspective a way to deal with these complicated questions without bringing to the forefront the scientific controversies raised by the data produced by researchers. This introduces an epistemological issue about how scientific questions, like the underlying paranormal abilities in men or women (when or if it exists in the way it is claimed), is a prerequisite that needs to be addressed by historical approaches. In 1999, during a conference on the history of psychical research (published later: Bensaude-Vincent & Blondel, 2002), philosopher Bertrand Méheust was criticized for using historical investigation to assess the clairvoyance ability of the nineteenth century somnambulist Alexis Didier (Méheust, 2003). The historian Nicole Edelman, proponent of a cultural and feminist approach to the paranormal, claimed such approach goes beyond the standard method of historians who are "not dealing with facts," an epistemological precaution extremely frequent in the writings of French historians (Evrard, 2016). Méheust replied that, while historians are studying the Second World War, considering extermination camps as facts is a prerequisite and not an afterthought. Méheust's argument is that historians demonstrate a double standard with heterodox objects, and ultimately hijack the historical method to "culturalize" and thus "de-naturalize" certain issues, which in fact participates in their eviction from the scientific field.

It is therefore with a certain irony that we can demand that these cultural historians explain on what evidence they base their assertions about gender differences in the paranormal. Until it is demonstrated that parapsychological abilities are not equally distributed between the sexes, or that certain gender characteristics are necessary conditions for their expression, we are merely dealing with representations and stereotypes, drawn from these historical contexts or from the contexts in which these stories are reconstructed, at the crossroads of an eclectic mixture of sociocultural influences. This essay focuses on the historical imbalance in the treatment of psychical research and spiritualism, in its personal and social contexts, and encourages a remedy that would consist in developing a fully symmetrical approach, not only in relation to gender, but in relation to the imbalance between cultural and scientific approaches, and in the equally asymmetrical treatment of orthodox and heterodox facts (Evrard, 2016; Schetsche & Schmied-Knittel, 2018).

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